

CA' D'ZAN FIRST FLOOR AUDIO TOUR



INTRO

Hello, and welcome to Ca' d'Zan, the winter residence of circus impresario John Ringling and his wife Mable.

During this tour you will get to know John and Mable, learn about the Ringling legacy, and understand what life was like in this 1920s Florida home as we walk through the 1st floor of the mansion together.

A note about using this audio guide: if you'd like to skip ahead at any point, just click on the title of the next room on the playlist. As you listen to the tour, please be sure you are keeping a safe distance between yourself and other guests, and always be sure to stay at least an arm's length away from any of the furniture or other objects on display—almost everything you'll see today is part of the museum's collection!

As you enter the foyer, we'll begin with an overview of the history of the Ringling family and their relationship to Sarasota:

FOYER

John Ringling and four of his six brothers created the Ringling Brothers Circus. When they acquired Barnum & Bailey in 1907, it became one of the world's most successful entertainment organizations, "The Greatest Show on Earth." John Ringling, like many entrepreneurs, diversified his business interests. He built a business empire that made him one of the richest men in America, and included holdings in ranching, oil, railroads, and real estate.

In 1905, John married Mable Burton. John was 39 and Mable was 30. The couple traveled regularly to Europe, scouting for circus acts, acquiring art for the museum they were planning, and collecting ideas that would inspire Ca' d'Zan.

The Ringlings first visited the southwest coast of Florida in 1909 and two years later bought an estate right here on this property. The estate was then known as Palms Elysian, and it included an existing home. The Ringlings enjoyed winters at Palms Elysian for over a decade.

Money poured into the state from the economic boom of the 1920s when Florida was developed into a vacation wonderland where you could fish, golf, hunt, boat, and enjoy the beautiful beaches. John Ringling

saw the potential to develop Sarasota into a world-class destination. His ambitious plans involved building a new, impressive house as a showplace on Sarasota Bay where the Ringlings could entertain friends, family, celebrities, politicians, and potential investors in style.

They chose a fashionable, high profile New York architect, Dwight James Baum, to create a Mediterranean Revival style mansion with eclectic influences blending Italian, Spanish, and Moorish details. The Ringlings' infatuation with the city of Venice is reflected in the array of Venetian Gothic details borrowed from famous Venetian palazzi, or palaces. In fact, the name Ca' d'Zan means House of John in Venetian dialect.

Construction on the house began in 1924 and was completed just in time for the holidays in 1926. Ca' d'Zan became a hub of activity, with luncheons, card parties, dinners and dances. Guests at Ca' d'Zan included local business and community leaders, as well as the Ringlings' high-profile friends from the northeast including humorist Will Rogers, the Mayor of New York City Jimmy Walker, presidential candidate Al Smith and entertainment producer Flo Ziegfeld and his wife, actress Billie Burke.

Guests arriving for a visit to Ca' d'Zan would have been met at the train station in Sarasota and driven to Ca' d'Zan in one of the Ringlings' luxury automobiles. The drive to the house across the estate would take guests through a lush, semi-tropical landscape. The Ringling butler, who presided over the mansion and its six servants, would have greeted visitors at the front door. After arriving and settling into one of the six guest rooms upstairs, you would prepare for a delightful evening of entertainment starting with dinner in the Dining Room. Let's go there now.

DINING ROOM

This is one of the most dramatic rooms in the house. A mixture of historical styles from Renaissance to Moorish was used to create an opulent and exotic effect. The shape of the coffered ceiling is inspired by Moorish design, while the painted ornament is based on Italianate aesthetic. The ceiling gives the appearance of being hand carved wood, but is actually molded plaster painted by the artist Robert Webb Jr. The Ringlings commissioned Webb to create decorative painting accents throughout Ca' d'Zan. We will see more of his work later on the tour. Webb was a skilled painter who had worked with the great American artist John Singer Sargent.

In preparation for a dinner party, the table would have been set with Mable's collection of china, silver, and crystal. She had several sets of fine and casual china, something for every occasion, and you'll see more of that when we end our tour in the kitchen. The table had a total of 20 leaves to accommodate a large number of dinner guests. We believe parties of that size were probably held in the foyer of the house, where we just were. After dinner, the festivities would continue.

Before heading to the Ballroom for an evening of dancing, you might spend time in the Tap Room for a post-dinner cocktail. You'll find the Tap Room directly outside the dining room, to the left. Go ahead and take a peek inside! Remember that, during this time, Prohibition was in full effect, but wealthy people like the Ringlings were still well supplied with wine and spirits. There are numerous salvaged architectural fragments and paneling incorporated throughout Ca' d'Zan, and John may have purchased elements of the bar from Cicardi's Winter Garden, a restaurant in St. Louis, Missouri before it was demolished in 1925.

You can pause the audio here by tapping the player on your screen. After you've made your way to the ballroom, you can resume by simply tapping it again.

BALLROOM

This room was created with dancing in mind. If you have any doubt about that, look up! The decoration of the ceiling is dedicated to the art of dance and is called *Dancers of the Nations*. The designer and painter was Willy Pogany, a gifted artist who was known for beautiful book illustrations, as well as theatrical and film set designs, including the famous Ziegfeld Follies. Each of these works is a separate painting on canvas that was completed in Pogany's New York studio, then brought to Sarasota for installation. Pogany also designed a ceiling mural for the 3rd floor game room of Ca' d'Zan, featuring imaginative vignettes of revelers at Venetian Carnivale.

Here, The fanciful depiction of world cultures on the ceiling speaks to the broader trend in American high-style interior decoration for cosmopolitanism. At this time, it was fashionable for wealthy patrons to commission themed decoration to show how worldly and well-traveled they were. These dancers include mythological characters inspired by ancient antiquity to a range of international dancers wearing traditional cultural costumes.

Pogany also included four vignettes in the corners of the room that illustrate popular contemporary dances in America history from the Fox Trot to the Argentine Tango. Look at the couple dancing the tango and imagine this room filled with people who dared to dance that risqué dance.

When guests had had enough dancing for one evening, they could move next door into the Great Court, the center of the house. We'll make our way there now.

COURT

Although the court is an enclosed space, protected from the elements, natural light floods into the room from the glass roof above. The architectural terra cotta on the balcony and cornices are the same materials used on the exterior of the house, originally created at the factory of O.W. Ketcham Terra Cotta Works, in Pennsylvania. Venetian-inspired motifs painted by Robert Webb Jr., on the pecky cypress ceiling give a sense of Old World charm to the then-new home. The distinctive texture seen on the pecky cypress wood naturally occurs when a fungus attacks a tree, forming holes from the inside of the trunk outward. When cut into planks, these holes give the pecky cypress its distinct surface texture.

A beautiful feature of the house is the colored glass used in the windows and doors. The quality of the light coming through the glass would bathe the house in warm, glowing colors. The bayside French doors open to the terrace and would have allowed guests to enjoy balmy breezes and spectacular sunsets.

Having a house directly on the bay has created some challenges to preservation efforts over the years. Historic preservation is a priority of the museum, and over the summer of 2020, a major project took place, focusing on re-leading the windows on the mezzanine with stronger metal alloys to replace materials that had deteriorated in the marine environment over time. Re-pointing terracotta outside on the West façade was also completed at the same time, and together these two efforts will make a huge difference in preventing future water intrusion.

But, let's return to the 1920s. The economic boom of the 1920s fueled a great deal of new building in New York City. Gilded Age mansions of the late 1800s, built by America's wealthiest families such as the Vanderbilts and the Astors, were being demolished to make way for new commercial buildings. The collections of these wealthy families were available to purchase at auction. The Ringlings were significant buyers at these events, purchasing both furniture for Ca' d'Zan and art for the Museum.

A feature of this space that isn't immediately apparent is the incredible Aeolian organ. The installation of the organ chambers, including its over 2,000 pipes, was specifically designed to fit within the walls framing the Court. It's quiet in the house now, as the organ will require a major restoration before it can play music again, but it is said that, during the Ringlings' time, when the court's French doors were open, the sound of the organ could be heard all the way across the bay.

As we exit the court, let's take a moment to meet our hosts, John and Mable Ringling. You will find their watercolor portraits hanging on either side of the organ console on the south wall. Savely Sorine, a popular society artist who painted the rich and famous, including British monarch Queen Elizabeth, painted these portraits of the Ringlings during the time they lived here at Ca' d'Zan. We'll pass by them now as we enter into the Breakfast Room.

BREAKFAST ROOM

The Breakfast Room is where guests would have gathered in the morning after a night of dancing and music. Notice the wrought iron gates in the entryway—this is a typical decorative element of Mediterranean Revival style homes from this era. While the Ringlings had no children, they did have a family of pets including John's German shepherd dog, Mable's miniature pinschers, and a flock of exotic birds. We have a number of photographs in the Ringling Archives of the Breakfast Room, showing birdcages around the table.

The lucky guests who were seated on the preferred side of the table would have had a great view of the bay as they enjoyed their breakfast. The furniture in this room is ornately carved in the Renaissance Revival style. Take a closer look at the beautifully carved supports under the dining room table, which include the figure of Joan of Arc. Also of note are the Asian ceramic guardian lions displayed on the table top. In addition to European fine art and decorative art, John and Mable also collected Asian art, and today an entire wing in the Museum of Art is dedicated to this growing area of the collection.

Over breakfast, guests might plan the activities for the day. The Ringling's estate offered a variety of outdoor features to enjoy, including a pool, beach, and tennis court. Water excursions were a popular pastime on the Ringling's yacht *Zalophus*, which means "sea lion" in Latin. Outings for the Ringlings' guests might have included a fishing trip. Or, perhaps you'd take a cruise to with an elegant picnic lunch to visit John's real estate holdings on what is today St. Armands and Longboat Key.

Entertaining guests in style took a lot of work! Next, we'll go behind the scenes at Ca' d'Zan, to see some of the rooms where the seven staff members spent their time.

PANTRY

This pantry and the adjacent kitchen were large, working spaces, enabling staff to cater a range of social events at Ca' d'Zan.

This specially designed sink is made of German silver, an alloy of copper, nickel and zinc. This softer alloy minimized the risk of damage to Mable's china.

You can see an array of her china displayed in these cabinets. They include Wedgwood from England, and a beautiful Tiffany luncheon set.

Before we move into the kitchen, make sure you notice the annunciator, or call bell system, on the wall about the refrigerator. Guests could press a button to ring the bell from their rooms, letting the Ringling's

staff know that their presence was required to press an elegant evening gown or prepare a midnight snack.

KITCHEN

The Ringlings wanted to create a home inspired by stately European architecture, but Ca' d'Zan was also a showcase for every modern convenience. The kitchen had both gas and electric stoves; two Westinghouse electric stoves riveted together, and two Vulcan gas stoves.

There are three Kelvinator electric refrigerator units in the house—one in the pantry, one here in the kitchen, and one in the taproom. Ca' d'Zan was fully equipped for hosting and entertaining the many guests of John and Mable.

As we wrap up our tour, you can exit the house through the back door and take in the stunning view of the bay as you relax on the marble terrace.

CONCLUSION

For 3 years, Ca' d'Zan was the elegant destination that the Ringlings intended to create. Sadly, Mable only enjoyed Ca' d'Zan for a brief time. Her untimely death in June of 1929 resulted from complications associated with diabetes and Addison's disease. 1929 also marked a change in John financial situation resulting from the stock market crash a few months later in October.

Despite financial woes, he continued to move forward with his plans to keep the estate intact as part of his legacy. John continued to spend time in Sarasota until his death in December of 1936. He left the Museum of Art, the Ca' d'Zan and the grounds to the people of the State of Florida.

The Ringlings had big plans for Sarasota. This house is a reminder of those dreams and all that the Ringlings were able to accomplish. We think they would be pleased that Sarasota has become an international destination, as well as by the later additions of the Circus Museum, the Historic Asolo Theater, and more.

On behalf of everyone here at the museum, thank you for visiting today and sharing in the Ringling story.